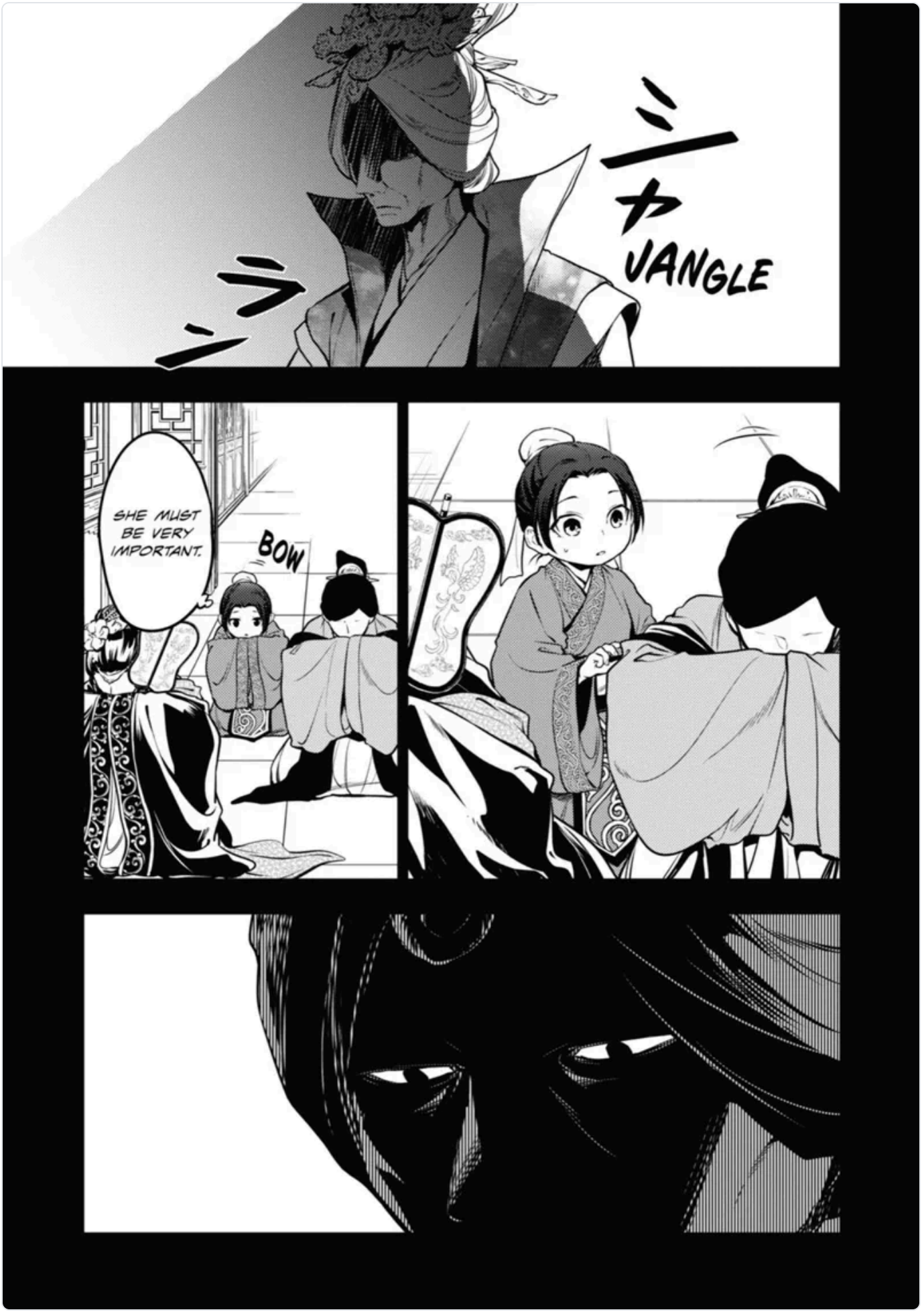
Chapter 55
BOMP
BOMP
BOMP
BOMP

FLINCH
TOTTER フラ
TOTTER フラ..
GRIP

FREEZE
OH!
MOTHER!
TMP
TMP

シャラン
JANGLE
シャラン
JANGLE
JANGLE
シャラン
ZSH!!


JANGLE
SHE MUST BE VERY IMPORTANT.
BOW

LET'S RETURN TO YOUR ROOM.
COME, NOW.
FWIP
TRMBL
TRMBL
TRMBL
CHATTR
CHATTR

RAISE

I WONDER WHO THAT OLD MAN AND OLD WOMAN ARE.
WHY...
...IS MOTHER MAKING THAT FACE?

I CAN'T REALLY REMEM-BER.
PWAH!
GULP
I FEEL SICK.

THE OLD WOMAN IN THE DREAM WAS MY GRANDMOTHER, AND THE OLD MAN WAS MY FATHER.
THEY SAY SOMETHING BAD IS BOUND TO HAPPEN AFTER ONE HAS A BAD DREAM.
IS THAT ANYTHING MORE THAN SUPERSTI-TION?
...IS ACTUALLY MY OLDER BROTHER.
AND THE MAN I THOUGHT WAS MY FATHER...
...ONE MIGHT CALL AMBER OR BURNISHED YELLOW.
...IT WAS A STRIKINGLY BRIGHT COLOR...
THAT DAY...
...A STONE FELL FROM MY FATHER'S HAND.

I WONDER WHAT THAT STONE WAS.
DAWN WON'T BE BREAKING ANYTIME SOON.
FWOOSH
...I GUESS I'LL GET SOME SWINGS IN.

I'LL HAVE TO ASK SUIREN TO PREPARE A HOT BATH FOR ME LATER.
I CAN'T KEEP MY SECRET FOREVER.

EVEN THAT GIRL WHO'S IGNORANT ABOUT THE ODDEST THINGS...
...WILL PROBABLY FIGURE IT OUT SOON.
OR MAYBE SHE ALREADY KNOWS...
THAT'D CERTAINLY MAKE THINGS EASIER FOR ME.

SUIREN SHOULD BE COMING TO WAKE ME IN A BIT.
I'LL JUST GET A LITTLE MORE SLEEP ...
...TILL SHE DOES.

Chapter 55 The Empress Dowager

THESE WILL BE YOUR QUARTERS, STARTING TODAY.
YOU REALLY MEAN IT? I CAN STAY HERE?
YES. I HOPE YOU'LL LEARN YOUR LESSON.
THANK YOU SO MUCH!
I TOLD YOU IT'D BE POINT-LESS!

NOW, NOW, YINGHUA. THAT'S A VERY UNKIND THING TO SAY.
BUT THIS GIRL!
SHE'S STILL HUNTING FOR BUGS DESPITE THAT FIERCE SCOLDING SHE GOT!
I HAVE REFRAINED FROM GATHERING LIZARD TAILS SINCE YOUR ESTEEMED SELF FAINTED DEAD AWAY THAT DAY, I'LL HAVE YOU KNOW.
OH, REALLY, NOW?
...THAT'S WHAT SHE WAS COL-LECTING BEFORE?
BUT I HEAR THERE'S SOME STRANGE COURT LADY GOING AROUND CATCHING BUGS AND CACKLING.
I HAVE DONE NO SUCH THING.
SURE, I HAD TO CATCH A WHOLE BUNCH OF MOTHS FOR THAT JOB...
...BUT I'D NEVER CACKLE WHILE CATCHING THEM.

...
YOU WANT TO KNOW HOW SHISUI'S BEEN?
HEY, GIRLS!
DO ANY OF YOU KNOW WHERE SHISUI IS RIGHT NOW?
YOU KNOW HER. SHE'S THE ELUSIVE TYPE WHO POPS UP WHEN YOU LEAST EXPECT HER.
XIAOLAN HAS STARTED USING MORE COMPLEX WORDS. MUST BE THOSE CLASSES...

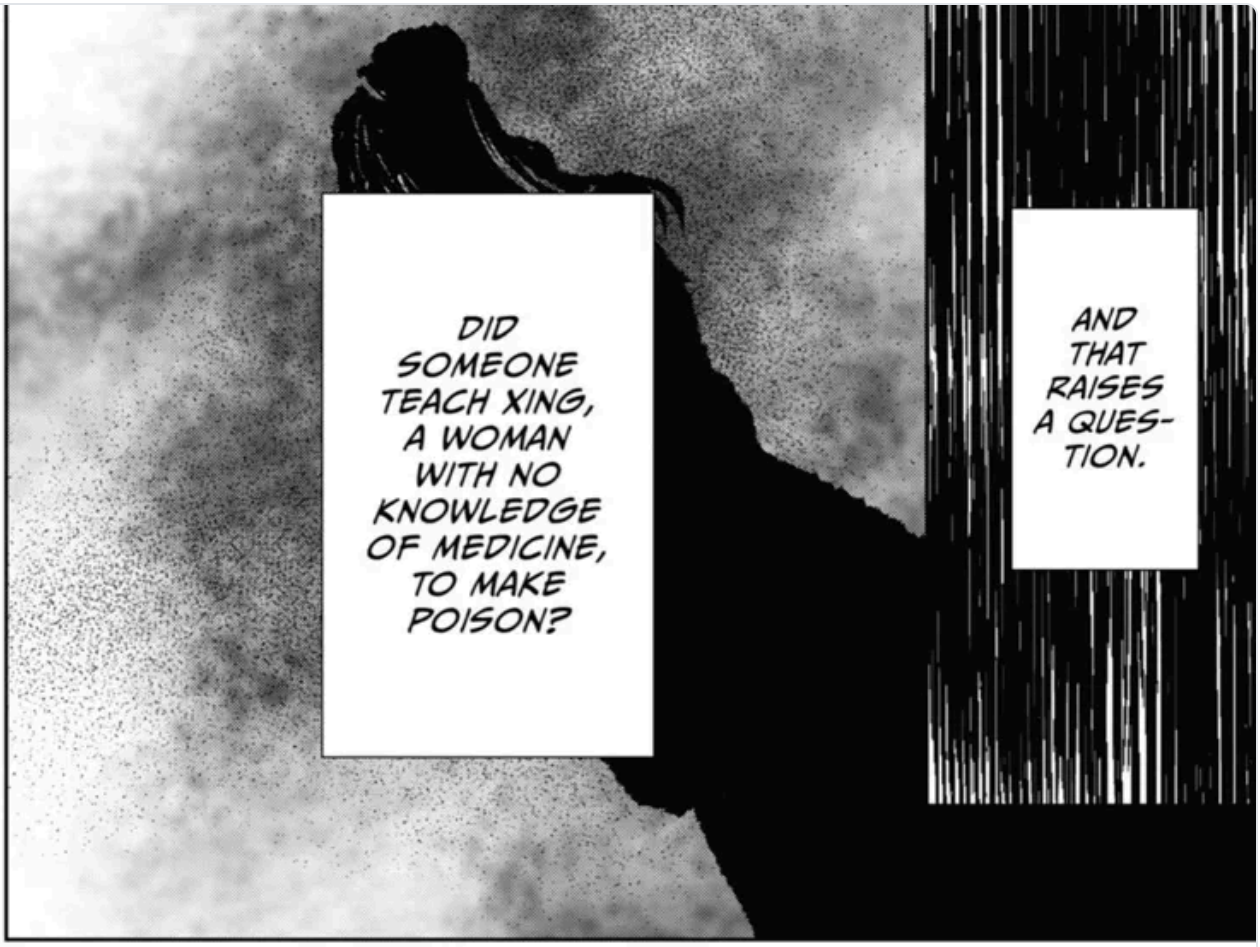
I MEAN, SHE MUST BE SOME-WHERE...
YEAH ?!
WHERE? TELL ME!
THEY'RE BEING EVASIVE.
UMM, I THINK I MIGHT'VE SEEN HER?
MAIDS LIKE XIAOLAN ARE PRETTY RARE. NOT EVERYONE'S COMFORTABLE BEING OPEN WITH ANYONE AND EVERYONE.
?
MAYBE THEY'RE BEING CAUTIOUS SINCE THEY DON'T KNOW ME, AND I'M CLEARLY ATTACHED TO A CONSORT'S HOUSEHOLD.
OOH.
I'LL GIVE YOU THIS IF YOU TELL US WHAT YOU KNOW.
FWISH

...IS THAT...HIS PERFUME?!
I SHALL LEAVE THAT TO YOUR IMAGINATION.
...AFTER XING STRUCK ME.
JINSHI GAVE IT TO ME THE OTHER DAY...
I'D SAY THIS THING IS HARDLY SERVICEABLE AS A TOWEL, THOUGH.
BZZZZ
BZZZZ
SO WILL YOU TELL US?
NOD NOD
I'M PRETTY SURE THIS IS WHERE I MET SHISUI BEFORE.
I GUESS SHE MUST BE FOND OF THIS NORTHERLY GROVE.
50

THE FLYING INSECTS ARE OUT IN FORCE. MUST BE SUMMER...
IF ONLY I'D BROUGHT SOME OF THE MUGWORT OR FRESH PINE NEEDLES WE USE AT THE JADE PALACE...
I COULD HAVE BURNED THEM FOR MOSQUITO REPELLENT.
FOUR-O'CLOCK FLOWERS GROWING RAMPANT ...
SO YOU CAN FIND THEM HERE TOO...
WHEN I WAS LITTLE, THE COURTESANS AND I WOULD GO OUT AND COLLECT THEIR SEEDS.
PLUCK
NOT TO USE THE POWDER WITHIN FOR MAKEUP...
...BUT FOR SOMETHING ELSE ENTIRELY.

A POTION TO INDUCE MISCAR-RIAGE.
XING, WHO WAS TRYING TO BREW JUST THAT, WASN'T IN THE HABIT OF WEARING ANY PERFUME ON HER PERSON.
SHE'D BEEN TRYING TO STEAL CONSORT LIHUA'S POSITION ...
...SO IT'S NOT ODD THAT SHE WOULD AVOID FRAGRANCES THAT COULD POTENTIALLY ABORT A PREGNANCY.
BUT THAT VERY SAME WOMAN THEN TOOK TO BREWING AN ABORTIVE POTION WITH SUCH FERVOR THAT THE SMELL OF IT CLUNG TO HER LIKE PERFUME.
THAT'S PROBABLY BECAUSE ...

THERE'S A GOOD CHANCE CONSORT LIHUA IS PREGNANT AS WELL.
...CONSORT GYOKUYO ISN'T THE EMPEROR'S ONLY FAVORITE.
TO MAKE THE COURTESANS' BREW...
...THE SEEDS OF THE FOUR-O'CLOCK FLOWERS ARE BOILED WITH A MIXTURE OF THINGS LIKE LANTERN FLOWERS, TREE PEONY, BALSAM, GARDEN PEONY, AND QUICKSILVER...
...ALL OF WHICH, SAVE FOR QUICKSILVER, CAN BE FOUND HERE AT THE INNER COURT.
BUT THAT WASN'T THE ONLY UNUSUAL THING ABOUT THAT INCIDENT.
...WERE ALL PURCHASED FROM AMONG THE WARES THE CARAVAN HAD FOR SALE.
HOWEVER, THE INGREDIENTS FOR XING'S POTION...


DID SOMEONE TEACH XING, A WOMAN WITH NO KNOWLEDGE OF MEDICINE, TO MAKE POISON?
AND THAT RAISES A QUES-TION.

KREEEE-
...AT THE INNER COURT?
AND IS THAT PERSON STILL HERE...
RUSTLE
KREEEE

BOING
BOING
I'M SO GALLED TO HAVE BEEN MISTAKEN...
...FOR HER.
GOTCHA!
HOP
KREEEE
KREEEE

CRUNCH
BUUUG!
OOPS.
I DON'T WANT TO HAVE A BUG STUCK ON MY HEAD FOREVER.
...GET OFF ME, ALREADY.

UH-HUH!
...WERE YOU OUT HUNTING FOR THOSE BUGS?
I'M SO SORRY ABOUT THAT, MAOMAO.
KA
BLOOSH
HM?
TROT
TROT
SIT
HMM ...?
DWEEE HEEE!
SHE SURE LOVES HER INSECTS.
57

NOW I WISH I HADN'T ASKED.
I KNOW THEY LOOK LIKE COCK-ROACHES, BUT THEY'RE A DIFFERENT SPECIES ENTIRELY, SO THERE'S NOTHING TO WORRY ABOUT!
OH!
THIS INSECT IS ACTUALLY NATIVE TO AN ISLAND NATION TO THE EAST! IT MAKES SOUNDS BY VIBRATING ITS WINGS! I BET IT STOWED AWAY IN SOME TRADE GOODS THAT WERE BEING SHIPPED AND ESCAPED TO FREEDOM! I BET THEY CAN ONLY BE FOUND HERE, JUST LIKE THOSE MOTHS WE CAUGHT BEFORE!
BLAB
BLAB
BLAB
KLAK
I SUPPOSE I WOULDN'T MIND SO MUCH IF WE WERE DISCUSSING MEDICINE.
AND! AND!
KLAK
KLAK

FEW PEOPLE CAN STRUT ABOUT THE INNER COURT WITH SUCH A LARGE ENTOURAGE.
THAT WOMAN DRESSED IN THE ELEGANT, COLORFUL ROBE AT THE CENTER OF THAT ONE...
...IS THE EMPRESS DOWA-GER.

SHE'S SO YOUNG, YOU'D NEVER IMAGINE HER TO BE THE MOTHER OF OUR NEATLY MUSTACHIOED EMPEROR.
SHE HASN'T CHANGED A BIT SINCE LAST YEAR'S GARDEN BANQUET.
...WELL, I SUPPOSE YOU COULD CALL IT A CONDI-TIONED REFLEX.
ONE OF THE VERY FIRST THINGS WE'RE TAUGHT IS TO KNEEL AND BOW OUR HEADS...
...WHEN-EVER SOME-ONE OF HIGHER STANDING WALKS BY.
...UHH...
WHY ARE YOU HIDING?
WHSPR
こそっ
WHY ARE YOU?
TECHNICALLY, I SHOULD BE DOING THAT AROUND JINSHI AND GAO SHUN AS WELL...
...BUT I TEND TO FORGET.
BEST BE MORE CAREFUL.

SHE IS?
OOH! MAYBE IT'S BECAUSE SHE'S THE ONE WHO STARTED IT.
I THINK THE CLINIC IS OVER THAT WAY.
PEOPLE SAY SHE'S A VERY COMPASSIONATE PERSON.
I'VE EVEN HEARD THAT SLAVERY WAS OUTLAWED AFTER SHE VENTURED THE SUGGESTION.
IF I REMEMBER CORRECTLY, IT WAS ESTABLISHED BACK WHEN THE EMPRESS HAD LOTS OF POWER.
AND IT'S STILL HERE TODAY BECAUSE OF HER.
OHH.
SO THAT'S WHAT BRINGS THE EMPRESS DOWAGER OUT OF HER WAY TO SUCH AN UNOFFICIAL PART OF THE INNER COURT.

THERE WAS ALSO THE QUESTION OF WHAT CONSTI-TUTED A SLAVE.
A BROAD SWATH OF ENTER-PRISES WERE UNABLE TO RECOVER FOLLOWING THE ABOLITION.
THE SLAVE TRADE WAS JUST THAT— BUSI-NESS.
FROM A HUMANE STANDPOINT, DOING AWAY WITH SLAVERY WAS A REVO-LUTIONARY SOCIAL REFORM.
ON THE OTHER HAND, IT HAD A MAJOR RIPPLING EFFECT IN SOCIETY.
IN FACT, THIS WAS THE VERY TOPIC THAT BROUGHT TOGETHER THE MADAMS OF THE PLEASURE DISTRICT FOR A GRIM-FACED DISCUSSION SOME YEARS EARLIER.
COURTESANS, WHO WERE PERFECTLY LEGAL, COULD BE VIEWED AS SLAVES BY THIS LATTER DEFINITION.
...BUT WHAT IF SOMEONE HAD BEEN PUT UP AS COLLATERAL FOR A DEBT? THIS TOO WAS A KIND OF SLAVERY IN THE SEMBLANCE OF EMPLOY-MENT.
IN THE CASES OF SLAVES WHO WERE TREATED LIKE LIVE-STOCK, IT WAS OBVIOUS ENOUGH...

YES, BUT...
YOU SHOULD PROBABLY GET BACK SOON TOO SO YOU DON'T GET YELLED AT, RIGHT?
I'D BETTER GET GOING.
ON THE FACE OF IT, SLAVERY HAS BEEN WIPED OUT...
...BUT EVERYONE KNOWS IT STILL EXISTS UNDER OTHER NAMES TODAY.
I WONDER IF THE EMPRESS DOWAGER VISITING THE CLINIC...
...HAS SOMETHING TO DO WITH WHAT HAPPENED AT THE CRYSTAL PALACE THE OTHER DAY.
HMMM...
IF SO, THERE'S NOTHING I'D LIKE MORE THAN TO GO EAVESDROP...
...PERHAPS MEDICINE AT THE INNER COURT WILL SEE SOME REFORMS OF ITS OWN.
WITH THE EMPRESS DOWAGER'S SUPPORT ...

...SINCE IT FEELS LIKE I CAN'T DO ANYTHING RIGHT THESE DAYS.
GUESS I'LL HEAD BACK TOO...
SEE YOU LATER!
DO IT AGAIN.
ARE WE HAVING VISITORS?
IT'S BEEN A WHILE SINCE I LAST CLEANED AT THE JADE PALACE.
YES'M...
THIS MAKES THE THIRD TIME.
I'LL DO IT AGAIIIIN!
YOU CALL THAT CLEAN?!
SHE'S BEING SO MUCH MORE RIGOR-OUS THAN USUAL.
...BUT THE OTHER LADIES ARE GETTING CALLED OUT LEFT AND RIGHT TOO.
I THOUGHT SHE'D FINALLY TAKEN TO PICKING ON ME...

IT'S BEEN SO LONG SINCE YOUR LAST VISIT, EMPRESS DOWAGER ANSHI.
THE EMPRESS DOWAGER IN THE FLESH!

IF THE RUMORS SPEAK TRUE OF THE EMPRESS DOWAGER'S CHARACTER, IT MUST BE THE FORMER.
I CAN'T SAY FOR SURE.
IS THE EXCEPTION-ALLY WARY CONSORT GYOKUYO INFORMING THE EMPRESS DOWAGER OF HER PREGNANCY ...
...OUT OF TRUST?
OR OUT OF OBLIGA-TION?

YOU THERE, YOUNG LADY.
BUT THIS IS AN AMICABLE ATMO-SPHERE.
EVEN THE SHY PRINCESS HAS WARMED UP TO HER TOTALLY.
...HOW DOES SHE KNOW THAT?
YES, YOU ARE CORRECT, YOUR MAJESTY.
AM I RIGHT IN THINKING THAT YOU ARE THE MAID WHOSE EMPLOYMENT HERE WAS ARRANGED BY JINSHI?

HOH HOH HOH!
SO HER MAJESTY AND THAT TOUGH ATTENDANT ARE OLD PALS?
SUIREN WAS MY LADY-IN-WAITING A LONG TIME AGO, YOU SEE.
I HEARD ABOUT YOU FROM SUIREN. SHE TOLD ME THE MAID SHE'D FOUND TO BE UP TO THE TASK OF HER TUTELAGE HAD RETURNED TO THE INNER COURT.
YOUR MAJESTY, I DO APOL-OGIZE...
...BUT I THINK IT MAY BE TIME FOR THE PRINCESS'S NAP.
GLANCE
68

WHAT AN INCREDIBLY PERCEPTIVE WOMAN.
NOW, COME.
SIT DOWN.
SHE MAKES IT SEEM LIKE SHE'S SIMPLY...
...CONSORT GYOKUYO'S SLIGHTLY OLDER FRIEND RATHER THAN HER MOTHER-IN-LAW.
YOU...
69

I...
...SEEM TO HAVE A KNACK FOR SOLVING ALL KINDS OF PROBLEMS, FROM WHAT I'VE HEARD.
...JUST PICK AND CHOOSE FROM WHAT KNOWLEDGE I HAVE...
...AND PRESENT WHAT APPLIES TO A GIVEN SITUATION. NOTHING MORE.
I HOPE THAT DIDN'T COME ACROSS AS ME DISAGREEING WITH HER.
70

BUT I HAVE NEITHER A WILD IMAGINA-TION...
...NOR THE LEARNING OF MY FATHER.
THAT'S WHY I INSIST ON A DISCLAIMER. THESE ARE THE WORDS I LIVE BY.
SURE, I TOUCH ON THE TRUTH HERE AND THERE...
...BUT I BET PA WOULD'VE GOTTEN TO EVERY ONE OF THOSE SOLUTIONS IN HALF THE TIME.
GRRK

IT'S FINE TO USE ONLY WHAT YOU KNOW.
YOU'LL HEAR NO QUIBBLE FROM ME.
KLINK

THERE'S SOMETHING I WOULD LIKE YOU TO INVESTIGATE FOR ME.
I WISH TO KNOW...
...IF I CAST A CURSE ON THE LATE EMPEROR.